Perceptions of Non-Target Confronters in Response to Racist and Heterosexist Remarks

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Abstract

Research has established that targets who express disagreement with prejudicial comments directed towards their social group may be viewed negatively by those they confront or by members of social outgroups. Less research has examined how non-target individuals who confront prejudicial remarks are perceived. The current studies were designed to examine how non-targets who confronted racist (Study 1) and heterosexist (Study 2) comments would be perceived as a function of the level of offensiveness of the comment and the confrontation style used. The studies also examined whether confronting behavior would affect perceptions of the individual who made the prejudicial comment. Undergraduate participants read vignettes depicting a situation with a high or low offensive prejudicial comment in which a non-target individual confronted assertively, unassertively, or not at all. Participants provided judgments of both individuals. Results indicated that non-targets who confronted highly prejudicial comments either assertively or unassertively were liked and respected more than those who failed to confront. Additionally, commenters who were assertively confronted were respected less than commenters who were not. These findings suggest that non-targets may be especially effective in confronting prejudicial comments, as they do not suffer the same negative consequences as targets who confront.

**Keywords:** prejudicial comments, confrontation, racism, heterosexism
Perceptions of Non-Target Confronters in Response to Racist and Heterosexual Remarks

Although attitudes towards racial and sexual minorities have improved over the last several decades (e.g., Devine & Elliot, 1995), our society still has a long way to go in the fight against prejudice. For example, research has shown that hearing racist and heterosexist comments is a common experience for racial and sexual minority members. In fact, 48% of African American college students hear racially prejudiced comments about their racial group “often” or “frequently” (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993) and 92% of homosexual individuals have encountered heterosexist hate speech (Herek, 1989). Majority group members also report hearing an average of four racist comments and three heterosexist comments per week (Dickter & Newton, in press). Much research has suggested that the college campus may be a particularly ripe environment for prejudicial comments and hate speech about various minority groups (Burn, 2000; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Dickter, in press; Dickter & Newton, in press; Plummer, 2001; Thurlow, 2001; Swim et al., 2003).

Prejudicial language can be harmful to minority group members who are intended targets of these remarks, or who happen to overhear prejudicial comments. Hearing prejudicial comments about one’s social group can lead to feelings of discomfort and anger (Swim et al., 2001, 2003), and eventually have long-term negative psychological, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive effects such as depression, lower self-esteem, stress, fear, and drastic behavioral changes (Cowan & Mettrick, 2002; D’Augelli, 1992; Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 1990; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). Research has also demonstrated that witnessing prejudicial comments leads to negative emotional experiences in non-targets as well, such as increased anger, depression, and lower self-esteem (Dickter & Newton, in press; Swim et al., 2001).

One way in which individuals can potentially reduce the harmful effects of prejudicial comments is to challenge the person making the prejudicial remark by confronting him or her. Confrontation
involves expressing disapproval towards the source of the prejudicial remark (Kaiser & Miller, 2004). Studies have shown that confrontation increases self-directed negative affect (Czopp et al., 2003) and feelings of guilt (Fazio & Hilden, 2001) in the commenter, which leads to a reduction in the commenter’s prejudice level (Czopp et al., 2003). Furthermore, Czopp, Monteith, and Mark (2006) demonstrated that individuals who were confronted about a prejudicial comment were less likely to make a future prejudicial comment. Confrontation also affects others who witness the confrontation, as expressing disagreement with a prejudicial statement leads to decreased public prejudicial behavior and reduced private prejudice in bystanders (Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994). Together, this research suggests that confrontation can have positive outcomes for the individual making the comment, and may also serve to establish egalitarian social norms among bystanders.

Most of the work examining the confrontation of prejudicial remarks has focused on situations involving minority individuals who are the targets of prejudicial comments. Much of this research has shown that target individuals are reluctant to confront the perpetrator in many situations (Swim & Hyers, 1999; Shelton & Stewart, 2004; Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002). For example, in a study by Swim and Hyers (1999), although most female participants who heard a sexist comment reported being upset, only 45% confronted the male confederate who made the remark in some way and only 15% directly confronted the man verbally. The decision to not confront has been attributed to the potential costs of confrontation, which are often weighed against the benefits of making a complaint (Kowalski, 1996). One particularly salient social cost of confronting may be the potential negative perceptions of others (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Shelton & Stewart, 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999). This fear may be warranted, as target individuals who confront prejudice tend to be evaluated negatively by those they confront (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Czopp et al., 2006; Shelton & Stewart, 2004).
Less research has focused on the confrontation of prejudicial comments by non-target individuals who are majority group members (e.g., Caucasian Americans, heterosexuals). Recent work has established that, like targets, non-targets are reluctant to confront prejudicial remarks due to a fear of being evaluated negatively (Dickter, in press; Dickter & Newton, in press). However, recent work has suggested that non-targets may not be perceived as complaining when confronting a prejudicial comment that is not directed towards their own group (Czopp & Monteith, 2003), as target confronters often are (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). It is important to study the confrontation of non-targets as recent research has established that confrontations by non-target individuals are just as effective as confrontations by target individuals in reducing prejudice in the commenter and preventing future prejudicial comments (Czopp et al., 2006). Additionally, recent work has shown that non-targets are more effective than targets at increasing bystanders’ perceptions of how biased the racist comment is (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010).

Based on this work suggesting that non-targets may be especially effective at confronting prejudice, the purpose of the current study was to examine specific perceptions of non-target college students who confront (or fail to confront) racist and heterosexist remarks. To investigate this, we modeled our study design after that used by Dodd, Giuliani, Bortell, and Moran (2001) who investigated perceptions of targets who confront. In their study, participants viewed transcripts of hypothetical conversations in which a man made either a clearly sexist or an ambiguously sexist remark. Results indicated that when a woman confronted a sexist comment, she was both liked and respected more by female participants than if she did not confront, while men liked her less when she confronted. In the current studies, we designed our vignettes to present prejudicial comments that were constructed from actual reports of typical prejudicial comments. The main goal of the present research was to examine whether judgments of a confronter would differ based on the offensiveness of the prejudicial comment.
Offensiveness was manipulated based on previous work demonstrating that one of the most important predictors of confrontation among non-targets is comment offensiveness, with comments higher in offensiveness confronted more strongly than comments low in offensiveness (Dickter, in press; Dickter & Newton, in press). Because a prejudicial comment low in offensiveness is less likely to be interpreted as prejudicial than a comment higher in offensiveness (Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008), perceivers may judge someone more positively for confronting a highly prejudicial comment rather than doing nothing, but this may not be the case for comments lower in prejudice that are more ambiguous (Dodd et al., 2001). Thus, the primary hypothesis of this research was that non-target confronters would be viewed more positively when they confronted a high offensive prejudicial comment than when they failed to confront this comment. For low offensive comments, no differences were expected based on confrontation style. Additionally, we also manipulated whether the confrontation was assertive or unassertive, to see if perceptions would vary as a function of style of confrontation.

A secondary purpose of the current studies was to test whether the confronting style would also affect perceptions of the individual who made the prejudicial remark. Kowalski (1996) demonstrated that complaining about a person can lead others to feel dissatisfaction toward the person they did not feel before. In addition, work has indicated that speaking out against prejudicial statements can activate social norms of egalitarianism (e.g., Blanchard et al., 1994) and increase bystanders’ perceived offensiveness of the comment (McClelland & Hunter, 1992). Overall, it was expected that individuals who were confronted would be viewed less positively than those who were not confronted, although specific hypotheses regarding how strength of confrontation would affect perceptions of the commenter were not formed, as this was exploratory.

### Study 1: Race
Study 1 was designed to examine a situation involving a racist comment. The vignette created was designed from the results of a previous diary study assessing situations involving non-targets’ experiences with racist remarks (Dickter & Newton, in press). This previous study also established that racist comments among college students were likely to be made by males in small groups of 2-3 people, so we designed our vignette to reflect these common situations.

Method

Participants

Participants were 140 (77 female) undergraduates at a medium-sized liberal arts college enrolled in introductory psychology classes, earning partial class credit. The mean age of the participants was 18.65 (SE = 1.03) and the racial makeup of the group was 89 (63.6%) Caucasian American, 21 (15%) Asian American, 9 (6.4%) African American, 8 (5.7%) Latino, 6 (4.3%) biracial, and 6 (4.3%) “other.” Data from one participant were excluded because directions were not followed.

Materials and Procedure

This study had a 2 (Comment Offensiveness: high, low) x 3 (Confrontation: control, assertive, unassertive) between-subjects design. Participants came to the lab in groups of 2-4 and were seated at individual computers with privacy screens. Participants were told that the study was about perceptions of group dynamics. Participants then read an online vignette depicting a conversation between 3 male students who were working on a school project together. The conversation began with the following benign dialogue:

Andrew: Guys, let’s figure out a topic and get going. I just want to be done with this research project.
Bob: Yeah seriously, it’ll be a pain, but the four of us can do it. Let’s figure out who is doing what.
Cody: Sounds good. I think we should each come up with a topic and do a literature review to see what people have done in the area. Between the four of us it should be pretty easy to find something that works.
Andrew: Cool, I'm good with whatever you guys choose. Just let me know what sites I can do the literature search on. By the way, where is Tyrone? What should we have him do?

The next comment was the racist remark, in which the offensiveness of the comment was manipulated. In the low offensive condition, one of the actors made a low offensive comment: “We can’t rely on him too much anyway, if we want good grades at least.” In the high offensive condition, the same actor made a high offensive racist comment: “People like him are only at this school to increase diversity - they’re not as smart as the rest of us anyway. We can’t rely on him, if we want good grades at least.” In a pilot test, the high offensive comment was rated as more offensive ($M = 6.45, SE = 0.15$) than the low offensive comment ($M = 3.37, SE = 0.39$), $t(48) = 8.63, p < .001$.

Following this comment, the reply of one of the actors was manipulated so that he responded in one of three ways. In the assertive condition, the actor said, “Hey man, you can’t dismiss his contribution to the group and insult his intelligence just because he's Black. He’s smart and what you are saying is offensive.” In the unassertive condition, he remarked, “That’s sort of harsh - someone could get offended by you saying that.” In the control condition, he said, “Well, I guess we’ll just have to do it.”

After reading the scenarios, participants completed an online questionnaire assessing several aspects of their perceptions of the actors in the scenario. All items used Likert-type response scales ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much. The first six items were meant to further support the cover story, and asked about the ability of the actors to communicate with one other (e.g., “How well did the students in this conversation express their thoughts?”). The following items, which consisted of the main dependent variables of interest, asked how much the participants liked and respected the three actors and how moral each of the actors was. After completing the questionnaire, participants were fully debriefed and granted credit for their participation.

Results
Analytic Approach

The data were analyzed using a series of 2 (Offensiveness: high, low) x 3 (Assertiveness: control, assertive, unassertive) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs). These analyses were applied to the dependent variables of interest, which are identified below. First, the primary hypothesis that perceptions of the confronter would vary as a function of comment offensiveness and assertiveness was examined, followed by a test of the secondary hypothesis predicting that the judgments of the commenter would vary as a function of the two conditions. All significant effects are reported.

Confronter

Liking. For confronters, there was a significant main effect of Offensiveness, $F(1, 130) = 4.59$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .03$, indicating that participants liked the confronter better when he was responding to a highly offensive comment ($M = 5.43, SE = 0.16$) than a less offensive comment ($M = 4.94, SE = 0.16$). This main effect was qualified by a significant Offensiveness x Assertiveness interaction, $F(2, 130) = 5.28, p = .006, \eta^2 = .08$ (see Table 1). To assess this interaction, the Assertiveness variable was analyzed separately for high offensive and low offensive conditions. In the high offensive condition, the effect of assertiveness on liking was significant, $F(2, 64) = 7.88, p = .001, \eta^2 = .20$. Tukey post-hoc tests demonstrated that the confronter in the assertive condition was liked significantly more than the control condition, and marginally more than the unassertive condition. There was not a significant Assertiveness effect in the low offensive condition, $F(2, 66) = 0.95, p = .39$.

Respect. There was a main effect of Assertiveness, $F(2, 132) = 9.02, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$. Post-hoc Tukey tests demonstrated that the confronter was respected less in the control condition ($M = 4.65, SE = 0.20$) than either the unassertive confrontation condition ($M = 5.78, SE = 0.20$), or the assertive condition ($M = 5.61, SE = .21$). This main effect was qualified by an Offensiveness x Assertiveness interaction, $F(2, 132) = 7.12, p = .001, \eta^2 = .10$ (see Table 1). In the high-offensive condition, the
Assertiveness effect was significant, \( F(2, 66) = 13.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29 \), with less respect in the control condition than the assertive and unassertive conditions. The Assertiveness variable did not yield a significant effect in the low-offensive condition, \( F(2, 66) = 1.78, p = .18 \).

**Morality.** There was a main effect of Assertiveness, in which individuals who failed to confront were rated as less moral (\( M = 4.86, SE = 0.17 \)) than those who confronted assertively (\( M = 6.09, SE = 0.18 \)) or unassertively (\( M = 5.62, SE = 0.17 \)), \( F(2, 133) = 12.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16 \). This effect was qualified by the Offensiveness x Assertiveness interaction for morality, \( F(2, 133) = 3.12, p = .039, \eta^2 = .05 \) (see Table 1). In the high-offensive condition, the Assertiveness effect was significant, \( F(2, 66) = 14.58, p < .001, \eta^2 = .31 \), with the confronter rated as less moral in the control condition than the assertive and unassertive conditions. Assertiveness was not significant in the low-offensive condition.

**Commenter**

**Liking.** For the commenter, there was a significant main effect of Offensiveness, \( F(1, 130) = 21.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14 \) (see Table 2), such that participants liked the commenter who made the high offensive statement less than the commenter who made the low offensive remark.

**Respect.** There was a main effect of Offensiveness, \( F(1, 132) = 15.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10 \) (see Table 2), such that participants respected the commenter more when his comment was less offensive, compared to when it was more offensive. There was also a main effect of Assertiveness, \( F(2, 132) = 2.51, p = .039, \eta^2 = .04 \), with the commenter respected more when the confronter did not confront him (\( M = 2.46, SE = 0.23 \)) compared to when he was confronted in an assertive way (\( M = 3.05, SE = 0.22 \)).

**Morality.** There was a main effect for Assertiveness, \( F(2, 133) = 5.64, p = .004, \eta^2 = .08 \) such that the commenter in the unassertive condition (\( M = 3.14, SE = 0.17 \)) was viewed as more moral than in the assertive (\( M = 2.35, SE = 0.18 \)) condition. There was also a significant Offensiveness main effect,
$F (1, 133) = 19.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$ (see Table 2), such that commenters who made the high offensive comment were judged as less moral than those who made the low offensive comment.

**Discussion**

In support of the primary hypothesis, when the racist comment was highly offensive, the confronter was liked more, respected more, and judged as more moral when he confronted, either assertively or unassertively, than when he failed to confront. This finding suggests that for non-targets, confronting a high-offensive racist comment yields positive judgments, regardless of confronting style. Whether non-targets confronted or did not confront a low offensive comment did not alter perceptions.

Judgments of the individual who made the racist comment were also affected by the comment and confrontation variables. Not surprisingly, when the comment was highly offensive, participants liked and respected the commenter less, and viewed him as less moral than when the comment was low in offensiveness, supporting previous research by Swim and Hyers (1999) in which individuals who made a sexist comment were viewed more positively on several characteristics (e.g., responsible, cooperative) when they made a non-sexist remark compared to when they made a sexist remark. The confrontation style did not affect how much participants liked the confronter, but it did affect ratings of respect and morality. That is, the commenter was viewed as less worthy of respect when confronted assertively than when not confronted. Additionally, the commenter was judged as less moral when the confronter’s style was assertive, compared to unassertive. These results provide preliminary evidence that assertive confrontations by non-targets may lead to more negative judgments of respect and morality.

**Study 2: Sexual Orientation**

Study 2 was designed to extend the findings of the first study to a situation involving the confrontation of a heterosexist comment. Typical heterosexist comments made by heterosexual college
students include the terms “faggot,” “queer,” “dyke,” and “gay,” to derogate others, regardless of the targets’ actual sexual orientation or the perpetrator’s level of heterosexism (Burn, 2000; Plummer, 2001; Thurlow, 2001). There is also a trend among adolescents and college students to use “gay” to mean “stupid” or “lame” (Athanases & Comar, 2008). These terms were thus implemented in the vignettes in the current study.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants in this study were 158 (91 female) heterosexual undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology classes. The racial make-up of these participants was 70.9% Caucasian American, 13.3% Asian American, 7% Black American, 5.1% Latino, 2.5% biracial, and 1.3% “other.” The mean age was 19.03 years ($SD = 2.84$).

**Design and Materials**

The design was identical to that of Study 1 and participants completed the same tasks. The scenario in the current study, however, described three college males planning a party and included statements about a fourth person’s sexual orientation rather than race. The conversation began as follows:

Bob: You guys psyched about the party this Friday?

Andrew: Hell yeah! Where are we going to do it?

Bob: We can do it at my place. Does that work for you guys?

Cody: Yeah definitely. Sounds great! Who is doing what?

Andrew: I can bring the beer and music. Hey Bob, do you have good speakers?

Bob: Yeah, this is gonna be awesome!

Cody: Cool, I can bring some cups and food. By the way, Bob, will your roommate be there? What does he think about having the party at your place?
Bob: No, the roomie is out of town for the weekend. He wouldn’t be up for a party anyway.

The heterosexist comment came next, and was either high or low in offensiveness. In the low offensive condition, the comment was, “That makes sense given how gay he is - whatever, who cares what he thinks anyway.” In the high offensive condition, the same actor said, “That makes sense given what a stupid fag he is - whatever, who cares what he thinks anyway.” In a pilot test, the high offensive comment was rated as more offensive (\(M = 6.32, SE = 0.95\)) than the low offensive comment (\(M = 5.37, SE = 0.26\)), \(t(48) = 3.24, p = .002\).

Following the heterosexist comment, confrontation style was manipulated. In the assertive condition, the actor said, “Hey man, that’s pretty messed up. You can’t insult him like that, or say what he thinks doesn’t matter just because he’s a homosexual. I find that offensive so don’t say it again.” In the unassertive condition, he remarked, “That’s sort of harsh - maybe you should tone it down a little bit, someone could get offended by that kind of stuff.” In the control condition, he said, “Umm...well, I guess he’ll miss out.” After reading the scenario, participants completed the same questionnaire as in Study 1, were fully debriefed, and given credit for participation.

Results

Analytic Approach

As with Study 1, the data were analyzed using a series of 2 (Comment Offensiveness: high, low) x 3 (Assertiveness: control, assertive, unassertive) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs). This analysis was applied to each dependent variable of interest, which are identified below.

Confronter

Liking. There was a significant main effect of Assertiveness, \(F(2, 150) = 10.31, p < .01, \eta^2 = .12\). Post-hoc Tukey tests indicated that participants liked the confronter better when he was assertive (\(M = 6.20, SE = 0.17\)), compared to when he was unassertive (\(M = 5.56, SE = 0.17\)) or did not confront (\(M\))
There was a significant Offensiveness x Assertiveness interaction as well, $F(2, 150) = 6.02, p = .003, \eta^2 = .07$ (see Table 1). For the high-offensive condition, the effect of Assertiveness was significant, $F(2, 75) = 6.76, p = .002, \eta^2 = .15$. Tukey tests revealed that confronters in the control condition were liked less than those in the assertive and unassertive conditions. The effect of Assertiveness was also significant in the low-offensive condition, $F(2, 75) = 9.55, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$. Tukey tests revealed that confronters in the assertive condition were liked more than those in the control and unassertive conditions.

**Respect.** For the confronter, there was a main effect of Assertiveness, $F(2, 147) = 24.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$, such assertive confronters were respected more ($M = 6.46, SE = 0.16$) than unassertive ($M = 5.06, SE = 0.16$) or non-confronters ($M = 5.05, SE = 0.16$). This effect was also qualified by an Offensiveness x Assertiveness interaction, $F(2, 147) = 33.58, p < .001, \eta^2 = .31$ (see Table 1). For the high-offensive condition, the effect of Assertiveness was significant, $F(2, 72) = 19.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = .35$, with confronters in the control condition liked less than those in the assertive and unassertive conditions. The effect of Assertiveness was also significant in the low-offensive condition, $F(2, 75) = 39.08, p < .001, \eta^2 = .51$. Tukey tests revealed that all means were significantly different from one another, with confronters in the assertive condition liked the most, followed by those in the control condition; the unassertive confronters were liked least.

**Morality.** For the confronter, there was a main effect of Assertiveness, $F(2, 152) = 12.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that the assertive confronter was judged as more moral ($M = 6.24, SE = 0.17$) than the unassertive ($M = 5.22, SE = 0.17$) and control confronters ($M = 5.17, SE = 0.17$). This effect was qualified by an Offensiveness x Assertiveness interaction for morality, $F(2, 152) = 16.76, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$ (see Table 1). In the high-offensive condition, the Assertiveness effect was significant, $F(2, 76) = 14.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = .27$, with the confronter rated as less moral in the control
condition than the assertive and unassertive conditions. In the low-offensive condition, the Assertiveness effect was also significant, $F(2, 76) = 15.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$, such that the unassertive confronter was rated as less moral than the confronter in the assertive and control conditions.

**Commenter**

**Liking.** For the commenter, there was a significant main effect of Offensiveness, $F(1, 150) = 4.49, p < .036, \eta^2 = .03$, such that participants liked the commenter who made the high offensive statement less than the commenter who made the low offensive comment (see Table 2).

**Respect.** For the commenter, there was a main effect of Assertiveness, $F(2, 150) = 3.32, p = .039, \eta^2 = .04$, such that the commenter was respected more when the confronter did not confront him ($M = 2.55, SE = 0.17$) compared to when he was confronted in an assertive way ($M = 1.98, SE = 0.18$).

**Morality.** There was a marginally significant main effect of Offensiveness, $F(1, 151) = 3.11, p = .080, \eta^2 = .02$, suggesting that commenters were viewed as slightly more moral in the low offensive compared to the high offensive condition (see Table 2).

**Discussion**

When the prejudicial comment was high offensive, the results of the current study replicated those of the first study, demonstrating that the confronter was liked and respected more and viewed as more moral when he confronted, either assertively or unassertively, compared to when he failed to confront. However, unlike Study 1, ratings of the confronter varied in the low offensive condition. Specifically, confronters were liked and respected more in the low offensive condition when they confronted assertively compared to when they confronted unassertively or failed to confront.

As in Study 1 and previous work (e.g., Swim & Hyers, 1999), participants rated the commenter more negatively when he made a high offensive compared to a low offensive heterosexist statement. More interestingly, the commenter was respected less when he was confronted assertively, compared to
when he was not confronted, which was consistent with the findings of Study 1 that suggest that ratings of respect may vary as a function of whether individuals are confronted assertively or not confronted at all. However, it is important to point out that, in the current study, ratings of morality did not vary based on confrontation style as they did in Study 1.

**General Discussion**

The main goal of this study was to examine how non-targets are perceived when they confront a prejudicial comment compared to when they fail to confront. Across both studies, results indicated that when responding to a highly offensive racist or heterosexist comment, participants liked and respected the confronter equally when he confronted in an assertive or unassertive manner, and more than those who did not confront. This pattern of results suggests that when a strong racist or heterosexist comment is made, non-targets who stand up for what they believe in and confront are viewed more favorably than those who do not. Although the judgments of the individuals who confronted the high offensive comments were similar regardless of whether the comments were racist or heterosexist, the findings in the low-offensive conditions yielded less consistency across studies. In Study 1, there were no differences in judgments of liking, respect, or morality in the low offensive condition. In Study 2, on the other hand, assertive confronters in the low offensive group were respected and liked more than unassertive confronters or non-confronters. That confrontation yielded more positive ratings of the confronter for the less offensive comments for Study 2 but not Study 1 is puzzling at first glance, but the explanation may be in the nature of the comments used in the studies. That is, the high and low offensive comments were selected based on a pilot test of how offensive the comments were. Research by Dodd and colleagues (2001), however, demonstrated that the confrontation is viewed more positively when it is in response to a clearly prejudicial remark compared to an ambiguous comment. With this in mind, we conducted a post-test with 50 college students from the same population as the two studies.
reported above to examine potential differences in ambiguity between the prejudicial comments in Study 1 versus those in Study 2. Results indicated that whereas the high offensive racist comment was viewed as less ambiguous than the low offensive racist comment, the low and high offensive heterosexist comments were viewed as equally ambiguous. The findings of this test suggest that it is the ambiguity rather than the offensiveness of the comments that affects the perceptions of how a non-target confrontor is perceived. Thus, perceptions of confronters of the ambiguous comment in Study 1 (i.e., low offensive) were not affected by confronting style but those who confronted the unambiguous prejudicial comments in both studies were perceived more positively than those who failed to confront.

The findings from the current set of studies extend previous research on the perceptions of confrontation in several important ways. First, research on perceptions of individuals who confront has focused on target individuals who are confronting a comment about their own social group, while the current studies examined non-target confrontation. The previous work with targets who confront demonstrated that those who confront are evaluated negatively by the individuals they confront (e.g., Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Shelton & Stewart, 2004) and by members of social outgroups who judge the confrontation (Dodd et al., 2001). The current set of studies demonstrated that non-targets who confront are not perceived negatively; in fact, they are perceived more positively when they confront than when they fail to confront. This is counter to the perceptions of the non-targets who are involved in these situations. That is, non-targets often identify the fear of being evaluated negatively as an explanation for why they did not confront a racist (Dickter & Newton, in press) or heterosexist (Dickter, in press) comment. The current results thus have important implications, as previous studies have established that non-targets are just as effective as targets in inducing negative affect and behavioral change in perpetrators of the prejudicial comments (Blanchard et al., 1994; Czopp et al., 2006). This project demonstrates that non-targets do not suffer the same negative consequences that
targets do, and, in fact, are viewed more positively when they confront. These results highlight the important role that non-targets may play in the reduction of prejudicial language, and suggest that educating non-targets about the positive outcomes and lower social costs of confronting prejudicial remarks may be a potential strategy to increase confrontation.

These studies also allowed for an examination of how confronting can affect perceptions of the commenter, with results indicating that the commenter was respected less in both studies when the confronter’s style was assertive, as compared to unassertive. These results imply that non-targets who strongly confront an individual who made a prejudicial comment may lead others present to judge the commenter more harshly. This finding is in line with research suggesting that confrontation may increase bystanders’ perceived offensiveness of the comment (McClelland & Hunter, 1992). Research has also found that non-targets are more effective than targets at increasing bystanders’ perceptions of how biased the racist comment is than targets (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010); the present work suggests they may be especially likely to do so when using assertive confrontation. It is important to interpret the results from the current work with caution, however, as although the findings in perceptions of respect were consistent across studies, judgments of morality were affected by confronting behavior in Study 1 but not Study 2. Therefore, these conclusions are preliminary and suggest that more work on how confrontation affects perceptions of individuals who make prejudicial remarks is warranted.

Future work should also investigate the role of gender. That is, the current set of studies was limited in that the actors in both vignettes were men – as such, we were unable to examine whether females in similar situations would be perceived differently than males. We chose to use male actors in these scenarios because previous research has established that men are more likely to be the perpetrators of prejudicial comments and are more likely to witness prejudicial comments in situations involving racial remarks (Dickter & Newton, in press) and heterosexist remarks (Dickter, in press). It is important
to consider the role of gender in future work, however, as females who confront may be liked less by men for confronting because they are violating a gender norm (e.g., Dodd et al., 2001). Although previous work examined perceptions of targets who confront, as opposed to the current emphasis on non-targets, perceptions of liking and respect may still be affected by gender roles. In addition, future work should examine whether non-target confronters are evaluated differently by non-target versus target perceivers. Dodd and colleagues (2001), for example, found that female participants liked an ingroup (i.e., female) individual who confronted more than one who did not confront, but male participants liked an outgroup (i.e., female) member less when she confronted. Thus, future studies investigating perceptions of confrontation should vary the group status of the perceivers.

**Conclusion**

Investigating situations involving the confrontation of prejudicial comments by non-targets is very important, as previous research has suggested that witnessing racist and heterosexist comments is a common experience for American college students. The results of the current studies suggest that non-targets who confront racist and heterosexist remarks may not be subjected to the same negative perceptions to which targets are subjected, and are in fact respected and liked more when they confront a clearly prejudiced comment. In addition, the current set of studies provide preliminary evidence that more assertive confrontation can also affect the perceptions of those who make prejudicial remarks, such that more assertive confronting can lead bystanders to respect perpetrators less than a failure to confront. Together, these findings suggest that non-targets can play a powerful role in the fight against prejudice and make it clear that future research should continue to investigate non-targets as confronters of prejudiced comments.
References


Footnotes

1. Tyrone was chosen as a stereotypically African American name, taken from a pilot test from a previous study in which names were chosen based on their prevalence in the U.S. population, and tested to be associated with the African American category in 90% of participants (Newton, Dickter, Gyurovski, 2011).

2. The analyses were also conducted with participant race (Caucasian American versus minority) and participant gender (male versus female) as between-subjects variables and results demonstrated that there were no interactions with either variable, so we collapsed across race and gender in the analyses.

3. The difference between high and low offensive racist comments on ambiguity was significant, $t(48) = 3.79, p < .001$, while the difference between high and low offensive heterosexist comments was not, $t(48) = 0.36, p = .722$. 
Table 1.

*Ratings of the Confronter as a Function of Comment Offensiveness and Assertiveness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 1</th>
<th>Study 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Offensive</td>
<td>Low Offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liking</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>6.05 (0.28)(^a)</td>
<td>4.61 (0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unassertive</td>
<td>5.52 (0.29)</td>
<td>5.17 (0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>4.71 (0.27)(^f)</td>
<td>5.04 (0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respect</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>6.05 (0.31)(^g)</td>
<td>5.17 (0.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unassertive</td>
<td>5.70 (0.30)(^i)</td>
<td>5.70 (0.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>4.00 (0.29)(^bc)</td>
<td>5.30 (0.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Morality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>6.32 (0.25)(^d)</td>
<td>5.87 (0.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unassertive</td>
<td>5.61 (0.25)(^e)</td>
<td>5.63 (0.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>4.46 (0.24)(^de)</td>
<td>5.26 (0.25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Standard errors are presented in parentheses. Means with the same letter are significantly different from one another.
Table 2.

*Ratings of Commenter as a Function of Comment Offensiveness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 1</th>
<th>Study 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Offensive</td>
<td>Low Offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking</td>
<td>1.99 (0.16)(^a)</td>
<td>3.00 (0.16)(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>2.13 (0.19)(^b)</td>
<td>3.15 (0.18)(^b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>2.23 (0.14)(^c)</td>
<td>3.12 (0.14)(^c)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Standard errors are presented in parentheses. Means with the same letter are significantly different from one another. Those with a cross (\(+\)) are marginally different.